

## LEADING WITH A LIMP

### *Take full advantage of your most powerful weakness*

Dan B Allender (Waterbrook Press, 2006)

A Synopsis/Summary/Reflection by David Loder

#### **A. AUTHOR** (from the cover)

“Dan B Allender, PhD, is a founder of Mars Hill Graduate School near Seattle, where he serves as President .He also is a professor of counselling, a therapist in private practice and a popular speaker.”

#### **B. THESIS**

This is a leadership book with a difference. Whilst most leadership books tend to focus on positive character traits and leadership techniques, Allender instead encourages leadership that acknowledges weakness and brokenness. In fact his core assumption is stated as, “ to the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader; to that same extent you will create an environment conducive to growing and retaining productive and committed colleagues” (2) and “to the degree you attempt to hide or dissemble your weakness, the more you will need to control those you lead, the more insecure you will become, and the more rigidity you will impose – prompting the ultimate departure of your best people” (3)

#### **C. FIVE UNIVERSAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES**

1. **Crisis:** Moving towards a goal while confronting significant obstacles with limited resources in the midst of uncertainty with people who may or may not come through in a pinch. It is not a bump in the pavement but the wall we hit while we're steering with everything we've got – and it leaves us wondering how we will survive.
2. **Complexity:** This is dealing with competing values, demands and perspectives. Making a decision sucks us into a vortex of competing possibilities. Leaders face a succession of impossible decisions when it is not a matter of right/wrong but they appear relativistic and random. With the best wisdom available, reflection and prayer a decision is made – which sets into motion the next crisis.
3. **Betrayal:** If you lead, you will eventually serve with Judas (who refused to repent) or Peter (who confessed). In either case the wound feels the same and the scars remain. It can result in loss of relationship and joy and often results in self-doubt and self-recrimination. “pastors are told they have to develop thick skin but keep a tender heart. Yeah, and leprechauns are waiting to offer expert counsel on winning lottery numbers.” (32)
4. **Loneliness:** On organisational charts, the higher you are the more rarified are your friendships. One price of formal leadership is being alone. It doesn't mean there is no friendship but leaders simply engage in a different fashion. The “perks” divide us from others but to the leader these seem paltry compared to the allure of normalcy. Leaders disappoint because busy-ness sometimes gets in the way of attending family or friends gatherings, slow to respond to emails etc. The decisions a leader makes isolates them from others resulting in criticism resulting in feelings of guilt.
5. **Weariness:** Leaders age faster than the rest of the population (compare photos of presidents and prime ministers four years after taking office!). The physical body suffers in leadership. Weariness is often about a core struggle to hope rather than stress and being tired. Will we continue pray, dream, and fight for people when the battle looks pointless?
6. **Glory:** (Allender adds this sixth). What do leaders do with glory? Throughout the struggle of leadership comes moments of glory. Generally after a moment of glory comes another impossible situation. How do we handle this? God pours out enough of His presence to keep us hooked. (36)

#### **D. FAULTY RESPONSES TO LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES**

1. **Cowardice:** We respond to crises out of fear or confidence. Some “confident” leaders may appear strong but fear may be the driving force. Fear leads to a growing emptiness which results in a self-fulfilling loop of paranoia and perceived betrayal.
2. **Rigidity:** We all tend to gravitate towards a one-cure-for-all-diseases approach to life – answers that work and these become the primary grid through which we see the world. This squelches spirited debate, silences questions, and forces the way forward along one narrow course. This rigid approach is a form of dogmatism, a narrowing of options that embraces only one way of operating as right and all others as dangerous or divisive.

3. Narcissism: Wounds that inevitably come with leadership may cause a leader to steel themselves against any future pain. The more wounded they are, the more they will steel themselves and the longer the wound is left unattended, the emptier their heart becomes. This narcissism is not merely self-centred or self-consumed, it is a debilitating process that becomes suspicious and manipulative.
4. Hiding: A leader may set up hierarchies that distances himself from staff and colleagues. He may end up with an executive team that is populated by yes-men and –women who are not committed to the good of the organisation. Isolated leaders have less information, feedback and wisdom and true participation for the best decision making.
5. Fatalism: The intensity of leadership produces weariness and prolonged weariness can easily prompt a sense of fatalism. Ineffective responses to any of the challenges will result in failure. Faced with the consequences of failure, leaders sense defeat and become fatalistic.

#### **E. EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES**

1. Courage: Crisis is from the Greek *krisis* which means to sift or separate. The Chinese symbol for crisis is the merging of two signs: “danger” and “opportunity” A crisis involves two elements: danger and shame. A crisis has the potential to transform or destroy. The choice is to either cower in fear or to step forward with courage. And the tipping point is brokenness rather than control.
2. Depth: “Foolishness” is the tipping point to depth. A fool is someone neither bound to convention nor tied to the dictates of the powerful. A fool lives on and beyond the edge. A leader-fool is free enough to operate outside tradition and conventional wisdom but wise enough to take advantage of any voice, no matter its source (even enemies). A leader-fool is unafraid of chaos or confrontation. This all requires a balance of alone time and being open to direction.
3. Gratitude: Gratitude is the fruit of humility. A leader serves as a privilege not as a divine right. He is humbled because he knows many others are more deserving of the position but that somehow, in God’s irony, he has been allowed to serve as a leader. It is only by and through grace that we are meant to lead. Gratitude opens the heart to acknowledge one’s gifts not with pride but with amazement and awe.
4. Openness: It is rare for a person to ask more than two meaningful questions of another person, especially if that other person is in distress. “If I could use only one factor to assess a candidate for employment, it would be the nature of the person’s friendships – longevity, diversity, losses, and betrayals – and the candidate’s desire to grow in the area of relationships. A leader will serve an institution no better than she lives as a friend.” (114f). A friendship involves truth or a pledge of fidelity. “Truth” comes from the same root word as “truth”. People can’t reach out to a leader who is arrogant, self-sufficient and independent.
5. Hope: Every leader is desperately in need of hope, but two factors entangle us: unlimited need and expanding opportunity. And those factors do their best to extinguish hope. Our busyness has little to do with God. More often we have lost sight of our callings and, far more, of the One who calls. Clearly the disillusioned and best leaders are those who have nothing left to prove because they have known both failure and success. Failure teaches us to not fear the contempt of others,. Success teaches us not to trust the applause of others. We are ready to ask the question, “What will please you, God?” When you admit that you can’t do everything, you are then free to more fully embrace the call of God. Hope focuses their work in conforming to God’s call.

#### **F. THREE LEADERS**

1. King: Creating life-giving structure. Builds infrastructure to provide and protect. Wise, vigilant, strong and bold. Imposes order on the chaos. Neither pessimist nor optimist. Brings together honesty and hope in the midst of crisis.
2. Priest: Creating meaningful connections. Creates meaning for the people through story. Three core questions for story: What is our identity? Where are we from? Where are we going? Helps define vision and mission and, in that process, connects people to how to live (delivery of the law), how to live well (creativity) and how to live well with others (connecting symbols and rituals).
3. Prophet: Creating compelling vision. Most people want to grow but the price of growth is pain. A prophet is an odd interplay of coach, poet, visionary, and therapist.

All three offices complement but also irritate each other. The king creates a strong centre. The priest strengthens the centre with myth and meaning. The prophet disrupts the centre in order to keep it from becoming stagnant. In the disruption, a new centre will be created and new meaning will be revealed.

A limping leader makes Jesus known as she clings to King Jesus to lead her, to Priest Jesus to comfort her, and to Prophet Jesus to tell her the truth.

### **G. QUOTABLE QUOTES**

1. It is through leading that I've known the greatest need for a deep, personal and abiding relationship with Jesus (2)
2. Leadership has been described as wearing a bull's-eye on your chest during hunting season. (3)
3. It takes humility to name our narcissism, and we're too married to our image to come clean about how messed up we are. This focus on self strangles authentic confession. (5)
4. The beleaguered leader can easily isolate himself and fill his loneliness with the cancers of addictive substances and behaviours, ranging from sex to alcohol to simple workaholism. (6)
5. Leading with a limp will definitely cost you something. (7)
6. A good leader will, in time, disappoint everyone. Leadership requires a willingness to not be liked, in fact, a willingness to be hated. (14)
7. Doubt is the context for surrender. And flight is the path for obedience. When we're reluctant to lead, doubting ourselves and our call, we are ripe for growth as a leader. ... God seems to choose leaders who don't want to serve, and when they do follow God's call, they often do so in a way that creates new chaos. (15)
8. The training for leaders – secular or religious – can usually be broken into three areas: content, skill and ethics/character. At the seminary I attended, 90% of the curriculum was devoted to content, 10% focussed on skill, and our character and ethics ... was never addressed beyond a few talks in chapel. ... In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... was still 80% content, 15% skill and only 5% ethics/character with a course on spiritual formation thrown in for good measure. (16-17)
9. Why does God love the reluctant leader? Here is one reason: the reluctant leader is not easily seduced by power, pride or ambition. (18)
10. Consider what we require. First a leader must be physically attractive ... fluent public speakers ... well educated, open, sincere, humble, salt-of-the-earth people able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps ... able to make tough decisions ... sentimental on Mother's Day. What we want is an illusion and we know it. (27)
11. Pastors are told they have to develop thick skin but keep a tender heart. Yeah, and leprechauns are waiting to offer expert counsel on winning lottery numbers. (32)
12. God loves reluctant leaders and, even better, he loves reluctant leaders who know they are frightened, confused and broken. (53)
13. He calls us to brokenness, not performance; to relationships, not commotion; to grace, not success. It is no wonder that this kind of leadership is neither spoken of nor admired in our business schools or even our seminaries. (55)
14. The difference between a manager and a leader is the internal urge to alter the status quo to create a different world. (58)
15. Every leader will feel the knife blows of betrayal and accusation from the rabble as well as from his dearest comrades. Followers enjoy nothing more than putting a leader on a throne and then waiting for him to tumble. (61)
16. No one is humble by nature. In fact, the person who appears naturally humble is usually too lazy to be ambitious or too fearful to take risks. (69)
17. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. (Anne Lamott) (77)
18. E-mail is the scourge of modern communication. ... At no time in the history of humanity has more information been available at our fingertips, and most of it is useless. (79)
19. God's plan becomes completely clear only from the vantage point of heaven. (80)
20. What am I not seeing in this situation? What grid am I imposing on my world that keeps me from seeing more fully? What bias from my ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, national, or experiential grid is binding me to my situation? (83)
21. Whenever you see polarities – good/bad, right/wrong, left/right – you know the real issue has been oversimplified. (87)
22. True success involves failure, brokenness and humility, but narcissists reject this notion. (101)

## REFLECTION LEADING WITH A LIMP (David Loder)

23. A leader is not an ordinary person because others view her through a lens of heightened expectations and desires. No matter how hard a leader wishes to be a regular person, it is just not possible. (109)
24. The moment we take on the mantle of leadership, other people assign us a power that can do them harm or good. Most leaders don't ask for such power over others; the power is simply given. (110)
25. The phrase "It is lonely at the top" is true, but it doesn't distinguish legitimate loneliness from self-inflicted isolation. There is a fine line between the two. (111)
26. Having friends at work can be problematical, and not having friends at work can be problematical. (116)
27. And for too many of us, the only solution to exhaustion is to get busier. (127)
28. The schedule that has back-to-back meetings seldom provides an opportunity to reflect, learn and plan. Instead, it follows the tactic of "ready, fire, aim." (128)
29. Busyness, however, is moral laziness because it involves refusing to live with courage and intentionality. (129)
30. What words best describe a leader? ... What is the single best word to describe you as a leader? (137)
31. The purpose of limping leadership is the maturing of character. (143)
32. My character is good to the degree that it grows Christ in other people. (144)
33. Leaders are called to lead with character. And leaders grow the character of others to the degree they bless the character God has written them to become. We can't glory in another person without embracing our own. (148)
34. A leader is called to go further than anyone else. (151)
35. The more honestly I name what is true about myself, the less I need to hide and defend and posture and pretend. ... So a successful leader names his failures – without being a confession junkie or inviting pity from others. (152)
36. We hold on either to what we wish to remember or to what serves us well to recall, and we flee from the parts of our story that most deeply expose and unnerve us. (161)
37. To be like Jesus means that we must enter the complexity of both dignity and depravity. We are made in the image of God – glorious. We have taken on Adam and Eve's hiding and blaming - ruin. We are glorious ruins, bent glory. (162)
38. If a leader publicly discloses his failure, he has to brace himself for trouble. Such an admission troubles the self-righteous and the prodigal alike. (171)
39. If you are a leader, it is not possible to be at peace with all and friends with everyone. (172)
40. How do you embrace honesty? The answer is threefold: give up what is already painfully obvious, tell the truth without telling *all* the truth, and embrace the gospel in your failure to live the gospel. (173)
41. We need to tell stories about failure and the need for grace; we need to share stories that invite the hearer to consider the wild, inverted paradox of grace. In fact, these three great paradoxes need to be told often: the already and the not yet, the call to be strong and tender, and the ways of being wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. (177)
42. It should be clear by now: leadership is all about maturity. A leader's first calling is to grow, knowing he is the one who has the furthest distance to mature. (185)
43. So if this sort of question is to be asked at all, it would be far better to ask: "How did Jesus relate to different kinds of people?" But, of course, HDJRDKP is not nearly as catchy as WWJD. (185)

### **H. QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. Read Mark 10:35-45. How do you respond to Jesus' "upside down" model of leadership espoused by Allender? What does it mean for you?
2. Report an example of a leadership challenge for each of the five/six areas Allender lists. Reflect on either a recent or significant one of these or how you responded/reacted in this case. Would it be any different in hindsight?
3. Reread quote # 30. Answer!
4. Choose three other quotes and make a response to each.
5. Is there someone with whom you can make an initial, open and honest response to the key issues in this book? What will you say? When will you say it?